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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether responses to questions concerning teenage sexual activity and teenage pregnancy differ by gender and by the marital status of the respondent's parents. A questionnaire was completed by 231 students attending a college in the Midwest. A number of significant differences were found in the analysis. Subjects from intact families appear to hold more conservative attitudes concerning teenage sexuality and teenage pregnancy than those whose parents are divorced. Subjects from divorced homes viewed early sexual behavior and the consequences of teenage pregnancy less negatively. Studies have consistently shown that subjects from intact families were less comfortable turning to their parents for answers to questions about sex, believing that their parents would disapprove if they knew that their teenager was sexually active. The questionnaire is appended. (Contains 16 references.) (JDM)

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ED 435 935

AN EXAMINATION OF ATTITUDINAL DIFFERENCES CONCERNING TEENAGE SEXUALITY:

THE IMPACT OF GENDER AND DIVORCE

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether responses to questions concerning teenage sexual activity and teenage pregnancy would differ by gender and by the marital status of the respondent's parents. An anonymous 32-question survey was completed by 231 college students attending a Midwestern University. Statistical analyses performed on the means of question responses revealed attitudinal differences existed by gender and by marital status of parents

Background of the Problem

Teenage pregnancy continues to be a national problem for communities in America today, despite the fact that numerous prevention programs have been implemented and millions of dollars have been spent over the past two decades in an attempt to address this issue (Alan, 1994; Allen, Philliber, Herrling & Kuperminc, 1997; Rolling & Burnett, 1997; Planned, 1998). The most recent data available (Alan, 1995) revealed that 101 of every 1,000 females between ages 15 and 19 was pregnant in 1995, placing the United States in the position of having one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates of all the industrialized countries.

In addition to the myriad of health and developmental risks for infants born to teenage mothers, teenagers who engage in early sexual activity resulting

in pregnancy attain less education, and are more likely to live in poverty, than teens who postpone sexual activity (Alan, 1994). Therefore, teenage pregnancy results in significant personal costs to the teen (especially teenage mothers), as well as ongoing societal costs incurred by communities, tax payers, and government agencies.

Many researchers have attempted to study program efficacy (Alan, Allen, Philliber, Herrling & Kuperminc, 1997; Rhode, 1993), identify teenage sexual behaviors (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg, 1989, Moore, Peterson, & Furstenberg, 1986), characterize sexual attitudes of teenagers, parents, and educators regarding teenage sexual activity and pregnancy (Groat, Giordano, Cernkovich, Puch, & Swinford 1997; Hersch, 1993; Moore, Peterson, & Furstenberg, 1986; Resnick, Blum, Bose, Smith, & Toogood 1990) and identify possible predictors of teenage sexual activity (Brindis, 1993; Fields, 1992; Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994; Ravoira & Cherry, 1992).

Most noteworthy to these studies has been the finding that a relationship exists between sexual attitudes and behaviors of young people, and divorce. This finding is particularly significant when one considers that divorce has become a commonplace occurrence in the lives of American children. In the United States today, at least 2 out of 5 children have parents who are separated or divorced (Furstenberg, 1994). Research has shown that divorce is associated with a number of negative outcomes for youngsters many of which may contribute to poor

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adjustment and problem-solving skills during adolescence and young adulthood. Several studies have found that adolescents from divorced homes have higher occurrences of aggressive and antisocial behavior, including more appearances in juvenile court, more smoking, greater alcohol and drug use, experience higher truancy and drop-out rates, and have more behavior problems than children of intact families (Frost & Pakiz, 1980; Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994; Resnick, Blum, Bose, Smith, & Toogood, 1990; Guttmacher, 1994; Kiernan & Hobcraft, 1997; Holahan, Sears, & Cronbach, 1995).

The degree to which children are negatively affected may be associated with both their gender and age at the time of the divorce. For instance, Frost and Pakiz (1980) found that adolescents whose parents divorced during their elementary school years experienced more problems than did those youngsters whose parents divorced when they were of preschool age. Their research also found that adolescent girls appeared to be affected more negatively than adolescent boys. Adolescent girls of divorced parents reported using more alcohol and drugs and experienced more instances of behavioral problems, diminished self-esteem, heightened anxiety, and depression than adolescent girls from intact homes.

Most relevant to this present study however is the research related to sexual attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, research (Guttmacher, 1990) has found that as divorce rates have risen over the past 40 years, so too has the

number of teenage girls having intercourse. The pregnancy rate among teenage women reveals that 18% of 15-17 year old women who have had intercourse become pregnant each year, with adolescent mothers being significantly more likely to come from single-parent households. Likewise, further studies (Furstenberg,1994; Holahan,1995; Kiernan,1997) found that children of divorce initiate sex earlier, are more likely to become pregnant in their teens, and have a higher incidence of cohabitation (but do not marry earlier) than children from intact families. These children are significantly more likely to express discontent with their lives and themselves, and are more likely to exhibit poor parenting skills and higher levels of marital conflict as adults. Similar results were found by Ravoira and Cherry (1994); that adolescent girls who changed from a two-parent family to a single-mother household were significantly more likely to become sexually active than girls of the same age from intact families made up of natural parents. These girls had 1/3rd higher rates of sexual intercourse, and were more likely to be associated with more repeat pregnancies than the girls of intact homes. The Furstenberg and Raviora studies both complemented earlier findings by Gunn and Furstenberg (1989) and Moore, Peterson, and Furstenberg (1986) wherein teenage girls from single-parent households, teenagers who received little parental supervision, and teenagers who were not doing well in school or whose educational aspirations were low, all engaged in first intercourse at an earlier age than girls from intact families.

Equally disturbing are the findings of Kalil, Spencer, Spieker, and Gilchrist (1998). Much like Frost and Pakiz (1980), Kalil found that teenage mothers reported more depressive symptoms, lower self-efficacy, and lower self-esteem than older women or those without children, thus placing them at greater risk for poor mental health. Kalil, et.al., further suggested that poor mental health contributed to repeat pregnancies and poor parenting practices for these young parents. When aligned with the findings of Furstenberg & Teitler (1994), which suggested that children of divorced families exhibited poorer patterns of adjustment in early adulthood, including the ability to establish and maintain stable relationships along with poor parenting practices, one is drawn to examine this phenomenon more closely.

A review of the literature consistently reveals that associations appear to exist between the initiation of dating, the initiation of sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, and whether or not the teenager's parents are divorced. A further association appears to exist with gender in association with these traits. Given this, then one would anticipate that the very attitudes teenagers hold regarding sexual activity might be influenced by the marital status of their parents.

Statement of the Problem

As divorce has become commonplace in society today, more children are being raised in single-parent homes than ever before. Teenage mothers are more likely than other teenagers to come from single-parent households. Given this, it is plausible to assume that the national divorce rate and the problem of teenage pregnancy in the United States are not unrelated. It is further plausible then to assume that the marital status of a teenager's parents may contribute to the very attitudes that the teenager holds regarding sexual activity.

Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the question was posed, "What is the relationship between attitudes and practices regarding teenage sexuality and the role of parents?" More specifically, "Is there a difference between the responses concerning teenage sexuality by teenagers whose parents are divorced from those whose parents are married, and will these responses differ by gender?"

To answer these questions, the following three hypotheses were tested: (1) Attitudes toward sex are different between males and females. (2) Attitudes toward sex are different for children whose parents are divorced than they are for children whose parents are not divorced. (3) There is an interaction between gender and marital status of parents that pertains to sexual attitudes and practices.

Methodology

The sample for this study consisted of 231 college students at Indiana State University. Indiana State is a medium-sized, public university in West-central Indiana. Indiana State has a liberal admission policy, and many students are first-generation college students. Indiana State draws students from large communities around the state such as Gary, Fort Wayne, Indianapolis, and Evansville, as well as from numerous smaller surrounding communities

The anonymous questionnaires were distributed to those college students enrolled in a Child Development/ Family Life course offered through the University's Family and Consumer Sciences department from the Fall/Spring semesters of 1995/96, 1996/97, 1997/98, and Fall 1998.

The 32-item questionnaire utilized a Likert-type scale for 28 questions covering attitudes and beliefs about teenage pregnancy and teenage sexuality. These were followed by 4 additional questions asking participants to provide information regarding age of first date, age of first intercourse, age of first pregnancy if applicable, and age of partner if pregnancy had occurred. Participants were further asked to complete demographic information including age, sex, and whether or not their parents were divorced.

Results

Results for the study are summarized in Tables I and II. The means of the scores to the questionnaire items 1 through 28 concerning attitudes, beliefs, and practices are contained in Table I. The significance of the scores for items 1 through 28 concerning gender, marital status of parents, and the interaction of both can be found in Table II. Results were analyzed and tested for significance by utilizing a two-way analysis of variance. Frequencies by age were also calculated and a distribution table regarding age at first date and age at first intercourse is provided in Table III. Regarding the three hypotheses tested, none could be rejected based on the results of this study.

There were attitudinal differences toward sex between males and females. Differences between gender significant to the $<.05$ level of significance appeared in responses to a number of questions (#9,10,17) regarding teenage pregnancy and teenage sexual activity. Differences between gender significant to the $<.01$ level of significance were also found in responses to questions (#20,25,27) regarding teenage sexual activity.

The study also found attitudinal differences toward sex with regard to marital status of parents. Individuals from intact families responded differently to five questions concerning sexuality and teenage pregnancy. Differences in

responses to questions regarding teen sexuality and pregnancy (#6, 8, 9,16-18, 22, 25) were found to be significant to the <.05 level, and the differences to a question concerning parental attitudes toward teen sexual activity (#20) were found to be significant to the <.01 level of significance.

Interaction between gender and marital status was found to the <.05 levels of significance to a question concerning to whom the teenager would turn for support if confronted with an unplanned pregnancy (#3).

Table I

Means of Responses to Questions

Question	Females Married Parents (n=115)	Females Divorced Parents (n=65)	Males Married Parents (n=34)	Males Divorced Parents (n=17)
1	1.18	1.18	1.43	1.48
2	1.13	1.26	1.29	1.35
3	3.49	3.29	2.82	3.47
4	3.82	3.62	3.59	3.24
5	4.23	4.34	3.97	4.18
6	2.69	2.95	2.65	2.94
7	2.87	2.82	3.03	2.41
8	3.2	3.77	3.32	3.35
9	2.39	2.8	2.09	2.24
10	3.54	3.45	3.09	3.18
11	1.23	1.17	1.18	1.06
12	1.21	1.17	1.35	1.18
13	1.08	1.14	1.03	1.06
14	2.35	2.26	2.06	1.82
15	1.62	1.8	1.29	1.65
16	1.88	2.18	2.06	2.59
17	1.9	2.22	2.26	2.53
18	1.6	1.88	1.65	2
19	1.86	1.98	2	1.88
20	1.3	1.72	1.79	1.82
21	2.3	2.56	2.41	2.47
22	3.51	3.25	3.65	2.71
23	3.04	2.88	3.26	3.12
24	2.76	2.41	2.18	2.24
25	3.05	3.47	2.5	2.82
26	2.82	2.61	2.68	2.18
27	2.26	2.38	2.79	2.76
28	1.85	1.78	1.91	2.29

Rating Scale

1=Strongly agree **2=Agree somewhat** **3=Neither agree nor disagree** **4=Disagree somewhat** **5=Strongly disagree**

Table II
Summary Stastics forTests of Hypotheses

	Gender			Marital Status			Interaction		
Question	F	Sig. of F		F	Sig. of F		F	Sig. of F	
1	3.46	0.06		0.1	0.75		0.03	0.87	
2	1.64	0.2		1.5	0.22		0.1	0.75	
3	3.96	0.05	*	0.01	0.93		4.4	0.04	*
4	2.01	0.16		1.87	0.17		0.13	0.72	
5	1.96	0.16		0.91	0.34		0.08	0.78	
6	0.04	0.84		4.16	0.04	*	0.01	0.93	
7	0.03	0.85		1.45	0.23		2.53	0.11	
8	0.11	0.74		8.32	0.004	*	1.98	0.16	
9	4.2	0.04	*	4.53	0.03	*	0.42	0.52	
10	3.89	0.05	*	0.1	0.75		0.19	0.66	
11	0.44	0.51		0.58	0.45		0.07	0.79	
12	0.58	0.45		0.38	0.54		0.26	0.61	
13	0.63	0.43		0.69	0.41		0.04	0.84	
14	2.17	0.14		0.35	0.55		0.09	0.76	
15	2.86	0.09		2.59	0.11		0.26	0.61	
16	2.19	0.14		5.57	0.02	*	0.37	0.54	
17	3.75	0.05	*	3.81	0.05	*	0.01	0.9	
18	2.36	0.63		5.1	0.02	*	0.06	0.81	
19	0.13	0.72		0.27	0.6		0.52	0.47	
20	6.64	0.01	*	7.25	0.01	*	1.66	0.2	
21	0.088	0.77		2.9	0.09		0.43	0.51	
22	0.15	0.7		3.77	0.05	*	1.8	0.18	
23	1.17	0.28		0.8	0.37		0.002	0.96	
24	1.49	0.22		0.7	0.4		0.29	0.59	
25	7.51	0.01	*	4.56	0.03	*	0.04	0.84	
26	1.59	0.21		2.69	0.1		0.48	0.49	
27	6.43	0.01	*	0.24	0.62		0.12	0.73	
28	1.83	0.18		0.04	0.84		1.82	0.18	

Rating Scale
1=Strongly agree **2=Agree somewhat** **3=Neither agree nor disagree** **4=Disagree somewhat** **5=Strongly disagree**

Table III

Frequency Distribution of 1st Date and 1st Intercourse

Age @ 1st Date	(n=232)	%	Cum %	Age @ 1st Intercourse	(n= 214)	%	Cum %
13	15	6%	6%	13	8	4%	4%
14	43	19%	25%	14	16	7%	11%
15	50	22%	47%	15	29	14%	25%
16	84	36%	83%	16	35	16%	41%
17	24	10%	93%	17	46	21%	63%
18	9	4%	97%	18	34	16%	79%
19	3	1%	98%	19	17	8%	86%
20	2	1%	99%	20	24	11%	98%
21	2	1%	100%	21	3	1%	99%
				Over 21	2	1%	100%

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This study examined the differences between responses to an anonymous 28-question survey concerning attitudes and practices among a sample population of 231 Midwestern college students. Of the 231 students, 180 were female (51 of whom reported their parents as divorced) and 51 were males (17 of whose parents were divorced). It was anticipated that attitudinal differences would be found with regard to gender, and with regard to marital status of parents. In fact, a number of significant differences were found upon analysis. Subjects from intact families appeared to hold more conservative attitudes concerning teenage sexuality and teenage pregnancy than those whose parents were divorced. In contrast, subjects from divorced homes viewed early sexual behavior and the consequences of teenage pregnancy less negatively than those who reported that their parents were married.

Interestingly, subjects from intact families were less comfortable turning to their parents for answers to questions about sex, with males from intact families being the most likely to talk to their girlfriends in the event of an unplanned pregnancy. Perhaps, then that it is no surprise that these same individuals believed that their parents would be very upset and would disapprove if they knew that their teenager was sexually active.

The data collected in this study adds to the body of literature concerning gender differences in attitude with regard to teenage sexuality and teenage pregnancy. Further, the data collected in this study adds to our understanding of the attitudinal differences that may be found among young people from divorced and intact families. Differences do exist, thus it begs the question, "How is it that young people come to develop these attitudinal differences ?" The attitudinal differences consistently found throughout the research in this area go beyond stereotypical attitudinal differences commonly found between men and women. Certainly, the data collected in this study supports earlier findings. For example, if individuals from divorced homes view teenage pregnancy less negatively than their cohorts from intact homes as this study reveals, then it is hardly surprising that national studies consistently find youngsters from single-parent homes becoming sexually active at earlier ages, and at higher risk for becoming teenage parents. It has also been suggested that divorced mothers may hold less restrictive attitudes about premarital sexual activity themselves. Additionally, studies have consistently shown that parental supervision is associated with later onset of sexual activity, yet divorced mothers may exert less social control over their children than two-parent households. Perhaps further research into parenting practices and attitudinal differences between divorced and non-divorced parents would be useful to answer this question.

Specifically, this study adds to the literature by examining the differences in sexual attitudes and practices among college students. The value in this analysis lies in the fact that these respondents are college students. It might be reasonable to assume that since they have been successful enough to find themselves in college, they are less likely to exhibit the attitudinal differences found in earlier studies. It is particularly striking therefore that differences were still found regarding gender and marital status of parents in the respondent's answers to the survey items.

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Appendix

Your Age____ Sex___ Years of School Completed___ Parents Divorced:Yes__No__

Please indicate your position on each of the statements below by selecting one of the following:

1. **Strongly agree**
2. **Agree somewhat**
3. **Neither agree nor disagree**
4. **Disagree somewhat**
5. **Strongly disagree**

1. Most 16-year-olds are not mature enough to become parents. ___

2. If you (or your girlfriend) discovered you/she was pregnant at age 16, you would feel worried and afraid. ___

3. The best person to talk to in the situation of an unwanted pregnancy at 16 would be one's boyfriend (or girlfriend). ___

4. The best course of action if facing a pregnancy at 16 would be to get an abortion. ___

5. The best course of action if facing a pregnancy at 16 would be to get married. ___

6. The best course of action if facing a pregnancy at 16 would be to have the baby and arrange for an adoption. ___

7. The best course of action if facing a pregnancy at 16 would be to have the baby, get a job, and raise the baby. ___

8. Being a single parent would reduce your chances to get married. ___

9. If you were pregnant at 16, it would be best to attend a special school for expectant mothers. __

10. Persons who are under 16 years of age have the right to have sex.___

11. Before having sex, the couple has the obligation to discuss contraception and agree on a reliable method to prevent unwanted pregnancy. ___

12. If a young man does not intend to raise a child, he should not have sex without contraception. _

13. If a couple has sex and she becomes pregnant, then he is as much responsible for the outcome as is she. ___

14. If you got pregnant (or made a girl pregnant) assuming that your partner was taking care of contraception, then it would still be your fault. ___

15. If you contracted herpes, or AIDS, from having sex with a person you did not know very well, it would be your own fault.

16. Girls who have sex with lots of guys without really loving them have low moral standards. __

17. Guys who have sex with lots of girls without really loving them have low moral standards. __

18. Schools should do more to discourage teens from having sex at an early age. ___

19. Young people who begin dating by age 14 are more likely to begin having sex before they are emotionally mature enough to deal with it. ___

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20. If your parent(s) knew you were having sex at age 16, they would be upset and disapprove. ___

21. Compared to your peers, you are more knowledgable about important sexual matters. ___

22. When you had questions about sex as a child and young teen, you felt comfortable in asking your parent(s) such questions. ___

23. In school, you received factual and helpful information about sexual concerns. ___

24. Masturbation is normal and should not be discouraged in young persons. ___

25. Homosexuality is abnormal and should be discouraged. ___

26. Sexual intercourse between any two consenting persons is acceptable, for you. ___

27. Without love, sexual acts are not meaningful; they are degrading. ___

28. Parents should exercise more control over their teenaged children under 16 years old. ___

29. At what age did you begin to date - going out with one other person in a pair situation?

a. 13 or under ___
b. 14 ___
c. 15 ___
d. 16 ___
e. 17 ___
f. 18 ___
g. 19 ___
h. 20 + ___

30. At what age did you first have sexual intercourse?

a. 13 or under ___
b. 14 ___
c. 15 ___
d. 16 ___
e. 17 ___
f. 18 ___
g. 19 ___
h. 20 + ___

31. If you have ever been pregnant (or got a girl pregnant), how old were you when the pregnancy happened?

a. 13 or under ___
b. 14 ___
c. 15 ___
d. 16 ___
e. 17 ___
f. 18 ___
g. 19 ___
h. 20+ ___

32. How old was your partner (if you answered Question 31)?

a. 13 or under ___
b. 14 ___
c. 15 ___
d. 16 ___
e. 17 ___
f. 18 ___
g. 19 ___
h. 20+ ___

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP

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